

“The Secret to Learning the Art of Contentment”
Sermon Series on Learning the Art of Contentment
in a World of Consumption #4

Dr. Peter B. Barnes
November 22, 2015
(Phil 4:10-13)

Introduction.

On the screens you will see a photograph of my wife Lorie along with one of the newest members of my family, Campbell Everly Barnes who was born in September. Isn't that a picture of contentment? Campbell has just finished nursing, and she's had her diaper changed. And Grandma Lolo is in all her glory holding that baby. She is so proud and happy. It's a picture of contentment. You want the moment to last forever.

It's not too difficult to experience contentment when life is good and things are going your way, like when you're holding a new grandchild in your arms for the first time. But what about when you find yourself in a situation which is difficult, and life isn't how you thought it was going to be? How do you find contentment then – when deal falls through, when the doctor gives you bad news, when you don't get the raise, or when the guy breaks your heart? Where is contentment when everyone around you seems to be getting ahead and doing so well, and it feels like you're falling further and further behind? How does one find contentment then?

The apostle Paul makes a remarkable statement in the passage we've read together this morning. He says that he learned to be content regardless of the circumstances in which he found himself. He also says that his experience of contentment wasn't dependent on what happened in his life. How do we find that kind of contentment? What's the secret Paul discovered? I invite you to join me as we try to discover Paul's secret to learning the art of contentment.

I. The Challenge to Find Contentment.

Contentment is defined as “the state of being satisfied mentally or emotionally with things as they are.” It's an experience of the heart which is expressed in a feeling of satisfaction and peace. Today it's rare to find a person who is truly content with his or her lot in life, and most of us battle with a feeling of dissatisfaction. One reason for this is because there is an entire industry that is designed to make you feel discontented. It's called advertising.

The purpose of the advertising industry is to create an experience of discontentment and make you feel like your life is incomplete unless you buy a particular product or have a particular experience. “You deserve a break today!” “Every kiss begins with Kay!” “Live mas!” “Lipsmackin', thirstquenchin', acetastin', motivatin', goodbuzzin', cooltalkin', highwalkin', fastlivin', evergivin', coolfizzin' Pepsi!”

I read last week that the average person is exposed to around 3,000 advertising messages every single day.¹ With the bombardment of information we receive on a daily basis which tries to convince us that our lives are somehow incomplete as they currently stand, how do you think this impacts the way we view our possessions and our general lots in life?

Another way to ask the question is do the things you own and the symbols of your success affect your attitude toward yourself? Does your lack of having as many possessions or accomplishments as the person next to you lead to feeling of inferiority? Do you detect an inflation in your ego whenever your financial profile grows? If you have either of these

reactions, then I would suggest that you probably aren't experiencing as much contentment in your life as you could and you've got some room to grow. I know I sure do!

If finding contentment is such a challenge, what's the key? What's the secret to learning the art of contentment in a world of consumption? I think the secret can be found in the passage we've read this morning in the book of Philippians.

II. The "Secret" to Learning the Art of Contentment.

A number of years ago, Earl Palmer wrote a commentary on the letter to the Philippians entitled *Integrity in a World of Pretence*.² In that book Earl explains how Paul ends his letter to the Philippians with a personal note of gratitude. But, as is typical of Paul's writings, even something as simple as saying "thank you" turns into a long paragraph with profound spiritual insight.

Paul thanked his friends at Philippi for their persistent search for him so they could extend some practical help. Perhaps they lost track of the apostle during his trial in Jerusalem, or during his two years when he was a prisoner at Caesarea. Or maybe they were worried when they heard that he had been shipwrecked on the Mediterranean Sea. Regardless, they finally discovered the apostle's whereabouts in Rome, and they sent their own emissary Epaphroditus to help the apostle and to deliver some financial support for his ministry.

Paul was a prisoner in Rome when he wrote to the Philippians. Prisons in the first century were dangerous places. If a prisoner didn't have family or friends on the outside to help with food and other needs, the inmate wouldn't have a regular supply of food and other necessities. Nevertheless Paul wasn't preoccupied with his situation, and he wanted the Philippians to know that he wasn't discouraged.

And in this context Paul shared with them one of the most remarkable sentences of faith: "*I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me*" (Phil. 4:1-13).

The word Paul uses here for "I have learned" is the Greek word *myeo*. It can also mean "mystery" and "to be initiated into a secret." What was Paul's secret? What enabled him to take in stride everything that happened in his life? Paul's answer is clear. It was his day-to-day relationship with Jesus Christ who empowered him along the way.

Abounding prosperity and devastating hardship – Paul had experienced both of them in his life, and he wanted his friends to know that he'd been able to cope with each of them because of the companionship he experienced with Jesus. One of the hallmarks of the Christian life is that if we put our trust in Christ and keep our eyes fixed on Him, circumstances begin to lose their power over us. Our self-image and our sense of security aren't tied to the things we own or what happens in our lives. While these things are important, they're not ultimate. And for Paul the most important thing in his life was his relationship with Jesus.

Paul's secret lies in the realization that both wealth and poverty are relative terms, and they are by nature transitory. The apostle doesn't make either one of them more important or less important than it is. Wealth and poverty are conditions in life over which we don't have ultimate control, and Paul says that he has learned the secret of taking each in stride as it may come.

The key is to let things happen without over-interpretation regarding their significance in the long run. And the reason for this is because Jesus Christ has already established what our long-term future is going to be by His death on the cross. The outcome of our lives for eternity has already been settled because of the victory won on the cross. And everything that happens in this

life between now and then is a temporary training ground for our eternal life that is yet to come. It's a dress rehearsal for the greater drama of eternity, and those of us who know Jesus will live in complete abundance when God will give us all things and we will reign in glory with Him forever in heaven.

So when I look at my life through the lens of eternity, I'm able to see that a life of abundance or a life of scarcity isn't going to last forever. They're only temporary. And what really matters is my relationship with Christ which will last for eternity. Do you see what Paul is saying?

III. The Provision of the Shepherd.

Let's look at this from another angle. God refers to Himself as a Shepherd in both the Old and the New Testaments, and it's a dominant theme in Scripture. Jesus even refers to Himself as the Good Shepherd. The opening lines of the 23rd Psalm have been a comfort to people of faith for centuries, "*The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.*"

In his book *Contentment: The Secret to a Lasting Calm*³ Richard Swenson writes that contentment comes to us when we tell the Shepherd that *His provision is enough for all our physical and material needs*. If our old car limps down the road, that's okay. If we get a shiny new one which doesn't have a limp, that's fine, too. That's because it's not about the cars. My contentment isn't affected by either circumstance, because the Shepherd is the source of my provision. And I'm more interested in Him as the Giver than I am in the gift He provides.

Swenson also says that contentment comes when we tell the Shepherd that *His presence is sufficient for all our emotional needs*. Instead of looking to people to meet my deepest emotional needs, or trying to fill up the emptiness of my heart with buying material possessions, I instead seek to develop a deeper relationship with Christ and look to Him to satisfy the longings of my heart. The deeper my intimacy is with Jesus, the greater will be my experience of contentment. And there I find that the Shepherd is enough. He's all I really need.

And finally, contentment comes when we tell the Shepherd that *His providence and protection is adequate for all our future needs*. Despite the uncertainty and turmoil of the world around me, I trust that God is in control and that He knows what He's doing. He holds time in His hands, and He holds my future, too. And nothing can touch me that doesn't first pass through the hands of a loving heavenly Father. Contentment opens the door to receive whatever blessing or hardship God sends or allows my way, and I trust by faith that He will work all things together for my good. Isn't that what Paul writes in Philippians 4?

Paul knew his own limitations, and he didn't portray himself as a triumphant Stoic. He knew himself too well to think that any secret power lay within him. Instead, he said that he could take all things in stride only because of Jesus who lived inside his heart and walked alongside him in life. "*I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.*"

The secret is the focal point of Paul's life, the center around which His journey of faith was oriented. As he focused his vision on Jesus, all the other things in his life were relegated to the realm of his peripheral vision, so to speak. The other things were still there, and he was aware of them. But they didn't dominate of his field of vision. And their sharp contours softened, and they no longer occupied the center of his attention.

IV. An Invitation to a Life of Contentment.

I'd like to invite you to explore what it means to learn the art of contentment. It involves a journey of faith that is centered on Jesus Christ, and it expresses itself primarily in two different ways. In another of Paul's letters the apostle writes, "*Command those who are affluent to do*

good, to be rich in good deeds and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life” (1Tim. 6:18-19).

In these verses, Paul says that there are two actions, two practices, in a person’s life which are keys to experiencing a life of contentment. The actions are **servicing** and **sharing**. Whenever a person cultivates these activities into the regular rhythm of their life, they inevitably discover a greater sense of contentment.

This first pursuit (do good and be rich in good deeds) relates to the generous use of our time. If you find yourself obsessing about money or looking with envy at the people around you and longing for what they have, then I suggest you find a regular place of service. Take the focus off of yourself and put it on someone else who is in need. The darker side of prosperity whispers, “It’s all about you.” But there is something about serving another person that trains the heart to answer, “No. It’s *not* all about me.” Serving others changes your focus, and it redirects your attention. And the effect it can have on your spirit is to rescue it from the delusion that you’re the center of the universe.

The second activity is sharing. Paul writes, “...*do good, be rich in good deeds and be generous and willing to share.*” It’s not only our acts of service for others but also our financial generosity that enables us to experience a contented life.

One way to combat the grip money has on my heart is to consistently give a portion of it away. And developing a practice of open-handed generosity frees me from such a strong attachment to the things I own. Giving is the natural expression that flows out of a grateful heart, and whenever we give in a generous way we’re simply reflecting the heart of Jesus who gave everything He had when He died on the cross for you and me.

Many times I’ll meet people who tell me they want to be generous in giving their finances to God, but they just can’t do it now. Either they’re saddled with student loans, or they’re just getting started in their career. Or maybe they just had a baby, or a child just went off to college and they’ve got tuition to pay. They say they can’t afford to give generously to God now, but later on they’ll get around to it. Many people don’t say, “No” to God. They just say, “Later.” But later never comes. It just keeps getting delayed. There will always be something that will keep you from giving generously to the Lord. And that’s when you realize that “later” really means “no.”

I challenge you to begin somewhere and to begin now. Don’t just fish through your wallet or your purse and see what you can spare when the offering basket is passed. Be regular, make a plan, and be faithful in your giving to God. Don’t postpone, don’t procrastinate. If you want to experience contentment in your life, learn how to give and learn how to serve.

Conclusion.

I have a final homework assignment for you. You don’t have to do it all this week, and you don’t even need to do everything I suggest. Here’s a list to choose from:

- Find a place to serve, and begin a regular habit of giving. That’s a good place to start.
- Later on today when you have lunch or dinner, chew your food slowly and slow down your experience of the meal. Savor the flavors of the food and linger in the conversation around the table. Find contentment in the simple gift of a meal.
- On Thursday, at some point during your celebration of Thanksgiving try to take a step back and take in the scene of everyone in your family or your circle of friends who are

together. Watch people as they interact with one another, and soak in the community. Take delight in the gift of relationship.

- Finally, try to cut back on what you will spend this Christmas. Even think about making something for someone rather than purchasing all your presents. And perhaps you can develop a habit of talking back out loud to the commercials on TV, and on occasion say, “Who are you kidding? I don’t really need that!” It’s a way of developing sales resistance and refusing to buy into all the advertising. These are some places you can start.

Richard Swenson writes that “in a world that honors outward achievement, tells people they’ll never have enough, and encourages an impossibly busy life, peace and contentment can feel like a distant dream. But it really is possible. We really can experience it. It’s available for our relationships, our finances, our career, our spiritual walk, and every aspect of our lives. But it is found in only one place – Jesus Christ.”

This Thursday you and I will gather with family and friends to celebrate Thanksgiving, and we’ll remember the first Pilgrims. We’ll mark the anniversary of the first settlers in the New World in 1621 who spent three days feasting with Chief Massasoit and the Wampanoag tribe of Native Americans. The Pilgrims gave thanks to God for their new Indian friends and for the Lord’s divine providence and His provision in their new home.

However, what is often overlooked in our commemoration of that first Thanksgiving is the fact that the Pilgrims gave thanks to God in spite of the terrible hardships and great loss they experienced the previous year. It was an expression of gratitude and contentment to God regardless of what happened in their lives. Of the original 102 Pilgrims who landed at Plymouth Rock, only 47 survived that first harsh winter, and half the crew of the Mayflower also died before returning to England. The Pilgrims’ first thanksgiving was offered in spite of the deaths of many people they dearly loved.

My encouragement to you and to myself this Thanksgiving is to learn the art of contentment not only when times are good but even when times are tough and life isn’t going your way. Develop a perspective that focuses on the glass half-full rather than the glass half-empty. And keep your eyes upon Jesus, the author and perfecter of your faith. He’s the only thing you really need, and when you trust Him you’ll discover He really is enough. Amen.

¹*USA Today*, 2006.

²Several of the ideas in this sermon on contentment are drawn from Earl’s book.

³Richard Swenson, *Contentment: The Secret to a Lasting Calm*, p. 15.